



Colour Me Beautiful

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# THE COLOURS OF THEIR WORLD:

## LOOKING INTO THE LIVES OF THE LENTEN PEOPLE OF NORTHERN LAOS

Imagine climbing a mountain in Southeast Asia, which offers a sweeping panoramic view of faraway fields and mountains, when you spot others traveling along distant trails. No matter who they are, you would be able to identify their tribe and clan, and perhaps even their village, just by the clothes they wear. For over thousands of years, each highland group has developed a unique style, marked by special garments, weaving techniques, embroidery patterns, and, most noticeably, colour.

One such group is the *Lenten*, whose very name means “people dressed in blue,” for they continue to follow the practice of their first ancestors by dyeing their homespun cotton tunics and trousers a deep, vibrant indigo blue. They brought this custom with them during centuries of migrations from southern China into Laos and Vietnam, passing it on through the generations, from mother to daughter.

## People Dressed in Blue

Women and girls embellish their indigo robes with floral silver buckles and long silken magenta tassels. White leggings protect their legs from plants and insects as they work in the fields. Men and boys wear dark indigo shirts over loose-fitting light blue indigo trousers, which are **cinched** at the waist with a magenta belt. Dressed in their traditional clothing, designed in such distinct colours, serves as a way for all members of the *Lenten* community to feel connected to each other and their ancestral roots.

◀ *Lenten* girls from Laos dress in their traditional indigo clothing



◀ A *Lenten* woman weaves homespun cotton yarn into cloth panels

There is no market where the *Lenten* can buy their clothes. The *Lenten* women make the clothing for all members of their family with skill, love and painstaking effort. This means that, like their mothers and grandmothers before them, they must carefully follow every step in a long cycle

that may take up to a year – from planting seeds and harvesting the cotton, spinning, brushing, rolling and weaving cotton yarn, dyeing the fabric with indigo, to cutting and sewing the cloth into its final, treasured garment.

## The Oldest Dye Known to Man

Indigo is the oldest dye known to man. It is used for dyeing textiles and clothing, colouring pottery, printing, and even tattooing. Natural indigo dye comes from a variety of plant species that grow in the wild or are cultivated on plantations that can be found in hot, humid areas around the world.

It is not surprising, then, that this vibrant blue colour is favoured by people from the four corners: the Tuareg of the Sahara wear turbans of dark indigo to protect themselves from the heat and scorpion bites, the Japanese dye their kimonos in various shades of indigo to symbolise nature and the blue sea, the Mayans not only coloured their fabrics with indigo, but also their ceramics, the people of Cameroon wear indigo garments as a sign of wealth. In ancient times, India was renowned as the most important source for indigo, which can still be seen in the blue block prints found on peoples' clothing and the temporary tattoo designs on their skin. In fact, the word indigo can be traced to the Greek word meaning "Indian dye."

Perhaps you, too, have indigo clothing hanging in your closet - "blue" jeans were originally designed for cowboys in the late 19th century, using sturdy cotton denim that was naturally dyed in indigo blue.

Tuareg of  
the Sahara

Japanese  
Indigo  
Kimonos

Cameroon  
dignitaries

Mayan  
indigo  
pottery

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17



◀ Bundles of indigo plants are prepared to make indigo dye

◀ A *Lenten* woman soaks indigo leaves in a hollowed tree trunk so they can ferment

Adding lime to the indigo liquid creates a thick paste of indigo dye



### Process of Extracting Indigo Dye

The indigo dye of Southeast Asia comes from a tall tropical shrub, called *Indigofera tinctoria*, which grows abundantly throughout the region. But how do the brilliant green leaves of this indigo plant transform into a dark blue pigment? It is an interesting process, which takes time and many steps:

1. The *Lenten* begin the cycle by planting indigo seeds during the summer season.
2. After three months, when the plant is fully grown, they harvest it, cutting the four-foot high stems at the base with a sickle and gather them in large bundles.
3. To extract the blue dye from the leaves, the *Lenten* rinse the indigo stalks and immerse them, weighed down by heavy

rocks, in a hollowed-out tree trunk filled with water. Here the leaves soak under the hot sun for several days, gradually **fermenting** until the liquid turns from clear to yellow to a bright blue-green.

4. The *Lenten* women then remove the plants from the tree basin, and add white lime to the remaining indigo-rich liquid, stirring it continuously until blue foam rises to the surface.
5. In two days, the foam dissolves and an indigo-lime substance settles at the bottom. They pour off the clear liquid at the top.
6. Allowed to settle one more day, what remains is a thick, dark blue indigo paste, which the *Lenten* store in baskets.



*Lenten* women are able to create different shades of blue by soaking their white cotton fabric over and over in water mixed with the indigo dye paste. The more times they soak it, the darker the colour.

As you can see, the *Lenten* prefer to wear the richest, deepest blues possible – so dark it is nearly black. Now look again and you will notice that it is not just their clothing that turns blue, but also their hands! **AGJ**

◀ *Lenten* boys from Laos wear jackets and trousers in different shades of indigo

